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ABSTRACT

A step-by-step process links listening, note-taking, composing, and revising in order to make a college level music writing assignment a more instructive and fulfilling exercise. In order to help them focus on the music, students are given a chart in which they divide the piece of music they are listening to into events, and then match these events with the composer's description of the piece, instruments they hear, and their own descriptions. Descriptions are later translated into technical music vocabulary. As a second step, students use this chart to organize a descriptive essay around a thesis of their choice. These initial essays are not graded, but comments are made. Before students write a final version of the essay, the class reviews the concept of an organizing thesis and discusses lead paragraphs. Following the essay exercise, students complete a questionnaire evaluating the music essay exercise. Student responses have indicated a greater understanding of the music and increased satisfaction with music appreciation classroom exercises than with other classroom strategies. (LP)

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Rhetorical Strategies for Music Criticism

(A Paper Presented at the CCCC Convention, New York City, March 31, 1984)

by

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Most of today's college students have grown up with a potpourri of 20-decibel rock-and-roll music, television commercials, outer space movies, and impersonal electronic sounds. It is therefore becoming increasingly difficult to lead these students to a general understanding of what the traditions of western music are all about. It is even more difficult to approach that most important, yet probably most elusive goal in any class that involves listening to music: to expand each student's ability to hear, to perceive emotionally and intellectually what the music offers, and thus to enjoy the music. We have a rich tradition of music in the west, reaching back close to a thousand years. It is as much the student's heritage as Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Raphael, Bronte, and the Wife of Bath. Yet so-called classical music is often a locked-door because the student has not been trained in how to listen to it. Most teachers of "Music Appreciation"--often a course that fulfills a Humanities or Fine Arts distribution requirement--do not have the luxury of spending several weeks on music theory to give the students a critical and technical vocabulary. Too often they must be satisfied with exercises <u>about</u> music, such as memorizing definitions, writing biographical research papers, or composing fantasies inspired by pieces of music--all of which may be good in themselves, but which do not address the goals of perception, understanding, and enjoyment.

It was with this problem in mind that Patricia Lutnes, Professor of Music at the Stamford Campus of the University of Connecticut, approached me to see if any of the writing across the curriculum experiments that our English Department has been conducting in History, Sociology, and Political Science classrooms were applicable to the Music Appreciation class. She had earlier worked with the Creative Writing teachers but the results were decidedly mixed. Too often the students wrote poetic and imaginative fantasies with little, if any, relation to the specific work at hand. The students <u>were</u> writing, but the writing only reflected the student's sensibility and offered no insight into the composer's intentions or achievement. Yet surely it was possible for writing in the music classroom to help the students listen more carefully and use what they heard to attune their responses directly to the assigned music.

My first researches into the bibliography were discouraging. Even in such standard writing-across-the-curriculum texts as Maimon's <u>Writing in the Arts and Sciences</u> there were no practical examples of writing in Music Appreciation. The bibliographies were mute on the subject. Clearly, Professor Lutnes and I were on our own to devise a series of strategies that would link the listening, note-taking, composing, and revising processes. Over the past two years we have broken down the process into separate steps, each of which addresses a particular problem.

The first problem occurs at the listening stage. Music is abstract and even seasoned concert-goers find that it is all too easy to settle back and simply let the music flow. How, then, can one help students, many of whom have never heard a symphony or a piano sonata before, to recognize what is happening while the music is playing? After Professor Lutnes had spent some time demonstrating specific instruments to get the students to identify their characteristic sounds, I came into the classroom with a long grid-like sheet (see handout, p.1). The music selection for the day was a movement of Berlioz' Symphonie Fantastique, "The March to the Scaffold." The students had already listened to some of the earlier movements of the work and had read the composer's program, detailing the melodramatic, but certainly easy-to-follow "plot" of the piece. (We deliberately avoided a classical or baroque "absolute" score, starting with a romantic, narrative work to give the students an anchor in story-telling.) During the first hearing, we asked the students to listen to the whole, short piece and to try to break it up into "events"--every time it seemed that something different was happening, they were to call it an event and in the first vertical column describe that event in any way that would help them recognize it again--"loud drums," "suddenly soft," "rushing forward," "cymbals crashing," "more 'joyous,'" "reappearance of idee fixe?" --in effect, the students were asked to come up with a private code that

would give them a handle on the work. The composer's intentions were then taken into account: at the next hearing, the students were encouraged to match up their events with Berlioz' program--was their second event the "somber and wild" section of the march? was it the crowd cheering and jeering at the condemned man? was it the swoop of the guillotine blade? (See handout, p.2.) At each successive hearing the students would fill in the as-yet blank sections on their grids. They had learned to identify instruments--an analysis that becomes easier when one isolates a section of the piece and listens only for the instruments in it, without having to note other musical information. For the present, under the categories of "Dynamics and Tempo" and "Texture, Form, etc." the students needed to enter only common adjectives--loud, soft, louder, softer, fast, slow. The repeated hearings also reinforced the importance of listening over and over to a piece of music as one tries to figure it out. More detail becomes apparent, more connections and developments are clarified.

We then addressed the problem of critical vocabulary: Following these initial note-taking steps, the students upgraded their notes by looking over the technical vocabulary that had been handed out (see handout, p.3): in place of "loud," the students could write forte; in place of "fast," they could write vivace; in place of "smooth" came legato. Often the words are simple Italian translations of their own

terms--but they are precise, technical terms, and in the discussions that ensued over when an *allegro* becomes a *vivace* or a *presto*, the students found how very exact the technical vocabulary is.

The next problem involved the transference of the rhetorical mode of description--or, in some cases, narration--to the notes. I gave a general talk to the students about organizing a paper around a thesis. I passed out a flow-chart (see handout, p.4) that placed the thesis first and tried to derive topic sentences from it. It included good and bad models: These students were, after all, writing about music for the first time and needed some practical guidance. Cassette tapes of the work on reserve in the library provided a chance for follow-up listenings as the students worked on their papers outside of class. (Cassette tapes allow easy access to particular spots of the music without destroying the record in the process!) This first set of papers was not graded; both Professor Lutnes and I annotated them, consulting the grid and worksheet as we read the final product, commenting at times on terms used in the grid that could have helped out the argument, or noting places where the grid should have been filled in more completely.

What kinds of papers did we receive? The results were surprisingly good for a first attempt. No student assumed, for instance, that "The *Symphonie Fantastique* was written by

Hector Berlioz" qualifies as a thesis sentence. Occasionally the theses were mechanical: "This paper will focus on the fourth movement, 'The March to the Scaffold,' and will try to analyze how Berlioz' musical and verbal images relate to each other." But others were much more specific and capable of development: "The fourth movement . . . is characterized by the fear, despair, and solace that one man experiences as he is led to his death for murdering his only beloved." I spoke to the class again as we passed the papers back, handing out a sheet of some of the opening paragraphs. The ensuing discussion let the students grasp more clearly the concept of a thesis (see handout, p.5). Professor Lutnes also included some "good" vs. "better" examples of diction, phrasing, and specificity (see handout, p.6). None of the students was likely to be tapped for writing program notes for the Philharmonic. But the paragraphs that made up the bodies of the papers showed a real engagement with the music:

> The movement itself begins with an unsettling pizzicato in the low register of the violins/violi at a dynamic level of piano. Suddenly, the timpani break the tension with a fortissimo eighth note figure. This violent entrace signifies the act of the man killing his beloved. . . . The brasses seem to hurry the pace a bit. The eerie mood is enhanced by long crescendo and decrescendo as the brass melodic line rises and falls, and by a clever countermelody of running eighth notes in the bassoon. At this point one can imagine the man running away from the scene of the crime.

fanciful, perhaps, but no more so than any of us is in the concert hall; more important, every "narrative" statement is firmly grounded in a musical event. Even students without as firm a grasp of technical vocabulary turned in well-thought-out analyses:

> Brilliant horns mark the beginning of the second event--the crowd gathers to witness the beheading. Violins and drums join in with these horns to make a polyphonic sound which personifies a converging crowd as staccato is used to represent the random, haphazard way in which they do so. The music is fast and loud, making the atmosphere almost carnival-like.

How do the students themselves respond to this writing of essays? A questionnaire that attempted to be as safely anonymous as possible produced a full spectrum of responses. Some resented having to address the music on musical terms: "I didn't feel that an essay [that is, of the sort that one writes in an English comp class] was what the music merited. I felt that I should write what the music was making me feel and why (or how)." Yet the same student admitted that using the grid "really forces you to listen to the different parts of the piece"--that is, to base your responses on what is really being played, once you are really hearing it! Others valued the organic quality--the linking of hearing, learning, and writing that, "when put together, . . . was all worth while in doing." To be sure, there were also those who saw the Music classroom, like the Art Studio, as a haven from "having to write:" "I expected this course to have

just written tests [i.e., multiple choice exams] and listening tests." The same student wrote, significantly, "I don't really understand the music, as far as writing a paper on it." These remarks capture both the student's anxiety at approaching "classical" music--a foreign language for most students--and what should be more familiar to us--the distance we have yet to travel before we can make writing across the curriculum a familiar, indeed an expected part of the student's undergraduate experience.

MUSIC 191
ORGANIZING YOUR NOTES

COMPOSER _____ NAME OF WORK _____ STUDENT'S NAME _____

I. EVENTS (Each time you hear something that seems to signal a different section describe it in a few specific words that will help you recognize it again.)	II. Program (Which part(s) of the printed program does the composer seem to be describing musically here?)	III. Dynamics and Tempo	IV. Instruments and Style	V. Texture, Form, Composition, Harmony, etc.
1st Event				
2nd Event				
3rd Event				
4th Event				
5th Event				

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"Symphonie Fantastique" by Hector Berlioz (1803-69)

Program by the composer:

"A young musician of morbid sensibility and ardent imagination in a paroxysm of lovesick despair has poisoned himself with opium. The drug, too weak to kill, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by strange visions. His sensations, feelings, and memories are translated in his sick brain into musical images and ideas. The beloved one herself becomes for him a melody, a recurrent theme ("idee fixe") that haunts him everywhere."

First movement: Reveries, Passions. "He remembers the weariness of soul, the indefinable yearning he knew before meeting his beloved. Then, the volcanic love with which she at once inspired him, his delirious suffering...his religious consolation."

Second movement: A Ball. "Amid the tumult and excitement of a brilliant ball he glimpses the loved one again."

Third movement: Scene in the Fields. "On a summer evening in the country he hears two shephers piping. The pastoral duet, the quiet surroundings....all unite to fill his heart with a long absent calm. But she appears again. His heart contracts. Painful forebodings fill his soul... The sun sets---the distant rumble of thunder---solitude---silence...."

Fourth movement: March to the Scaffold. "He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he has been condemned to die and is being led to the scaffold. The procession moves to the sounds of a march now somber and wild, now brilliant and solemn....At the very end the 'fixed idea' reappears for an instant, like a last thought of love interrupted by the fall of the axe."

Fifth movement: Dream of a Witches' Sabbath. "He sees himself at a witches' sabbath surrounded by a host of fearsome specters who have gathered for his funeral. Unearthly sounds, groans, shrieks of laughter...The melody of his veloved is heard, but it has lost its noble and reserved character. It has become a vulgar tune, trivial and grotesque. It is she who comes to the infernal orgy. A howl of joy greets her arrival. She joins the diabolical dance. Bells toll for the dead. A burlesque of the Dies Irae. Dance of the witches. The dance and the Dies Irae combined."

Music 191 Listening Worksheet

I Dynamics	II Tempo	III. Instruments	IV. Style or manner of playing
pp	Vivace	Mostly strings	legato
p	Allegro	" woodwinds	staccato
mp (or mf)	Moderato	" brass	
f	Andante	Combination	lyrical
ff	Adagio	Piano	dramatic
cresecndo		Harpsichord	
decrecendo		Voice	pizzicato
sforzando			tremolo
accent			tonguing

V. Texture	VI. Form	VII.Compositional aspects	VIII.General
Monophonic	Fugue (or fugal)	Motive: Rhythmic	Abstract
Polyphonic	Suite	" : Melodic	Programmatic
Homophonic	Sonata	Repeated phrases	Nationalistic
	Symphony	Regular phrases	Sacred
	Concerto	Sequence	Based on folk element
	Chamber Music		
	Theme & Variations		
	Minuet & Trio		
	Scherzo & Trio		
	Rondo		
	Oratorio		
	Chocale		
IX.Harmony	Concerto Grosso		
	Song		
Diatonic	Character piece		
Chromatic	Symphonic Poem		
Atonal	Concert Overture		
	Music for dance		

MUSIC 191
ORGANIZING YOUR ESSAY

I. Take notes at repeated hearings

II. Work out a thesis—a general statement that lets the reader know just what you think the composer is doing in this piece.

Not: The Symphonie Fantastique was written by Hector Berlioz.
But: The fourth movement of the Symphonie Fantastique, "The March to the Guillotine," is characterized by _____.
(Find a general word that describes your specific reaction to the movement.
Samples: grotesqueness, nervousness, paranoia, bravura, fear, etc.
Or
choose a phrase that describes the most important thing that happens.
Samples: a crescendo of passion, fussy dynamics, a reapparance of the idee fixe in an unusual setting, a use of varied instrumentation to depict a mind at terror, etc.
You may find that some of these wouldn't apply at all. So come up with your own. But remember that it should fit this piece like a glove; it should not be so general as to fit any other piece of music.)
Write out your own thesis right here:

III. Work out an organization by paragraphs.
You may want to choose either: chronology (What happens first? then what?)
or: topics (Dynamics, Tempo, Instrumentation, etc.)
Either way, avoid the laundry list! Make sure that each paragraph will relate back to your thesis. How?

IV. Develop your paragraphs.

Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence that refers back to your thesis.
Not: The second section introduces the brasses.
But: The brass instruments in the second section increase the grotesqueness of the march. (How do they? Why do they? By answering those questions you develop your paragraph.)

Write out your first topic sentence:

(Remember that you will support it by specific examples taken from your notes)
Your second topic sentence:

Your third, fourth, fifth (or however many you have. Remember that each should introduce a paragraph of four or five sentences.)

V. Rewrite your opening and closing paragraphs to frame the other paragraphs.

VI. Check: 1) vocabulary (Have you used technical terms from the listening worksheet wherever they are appropriate? Check spelling!)
2) organization (Does each paragraph center around one topic?)
3) grammar (Is each sentence organized around a subject and verb?)

PLEASE TURN IN THIS SHEET AND THE "ORGANIZING YOUR NOTES" WORKSHEET ALONG WITH YOUR FINAL COPY.

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Music 191: Opening paragraphs.

"The fourth movement of the Symphonie Fantastique, "The March to the Guillotine," is characterized by a flight of madness. The condemn's eratic travels are not of a physical nature; they take place in his mind. The physical action is the marching of the crowd whose strong, regular movements can temporarily quelch the prisoner's madness. Only death can finally end the lover's lunacy."

"The fourth movment of the Symphonie Fantastique, "The March to the Guillotine," is characterized by the hysterical and paranoid mind of the condemned murderer, which is only restored for a single instant at the thought of his beloved."

"Although the fourth movement of the Symphonie Fantastique at times seems overly triumphant and cheerful for an execution situation, it nevertheless gives one an excellent idea of the tensions and anxieties that occur when one is to be executed for killing another."

"Hector Berlicz's fourth movement of the Symphonie Fantastique, "The March to the Scaffold," is an outstanding example of how music can accurately display emotion and feeling. Throughout this forth movement, one can envision the macabre story of a lovesick musician's grotesque nightmare of his coming to his doom.

Good: "There is trumpet and staccato."

Better: "..staccato cellos ride forcefully down the scale."

Good: "It is played allegro."

Better: "A frenzied, race-like pace gallops in."

Good: "The strings are using tremolo."

Better: "The melody....sounds perverse and dissonant against the nervous tremolo in the strings."

You may project your own imagination:

"Finally the tortured soul in blind panic wanders off away from his corporeal fate. In this state he for a moment resuscitates his beloved."

You may suggest human qualities in the music itself:

"The tempo is quick, darting..."

"..nervous tremolo.."

"The melody sinks...into remorseful tones..."